MAKING ENGLISH FAIR FOR EVERYONE: TEACHING MIXED-ABILITY CLASSES IN SAMARKAND

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Abstract

This article explains a practical teaching method called **Differentiated Instruction (DI)**, which helps teachers manage classes where students have very different English skills (mixed-ability groups). Using a real-life example (a case study) from an 8th-grade classroom in Samarkand, we show how changing a writing assignment to fit three different skill levels led to better student performance and more confidence. The main idea is that every student should get a version of the work that is "just right" for them, which makes learning more successful and engaging.

Keywords: Mixed-Ability, Differentiated Instruction, Case Study, Middle School, EFL, Scaffolding, Student Confidence.

Introduction: Why Not Everyone Learns the Same Way

Imagine a typical 8th-grade English class in Samarkand. Some students might speak English well because they went to a private language center, while others are just starting to learn the basics. This is called a **mixed-ability group**.

Teaching this group with the exact same lesson and the exact same test is like trying to fit everyone in the same size shoe it only works for a few people (Tomlinson, 2001). The fast learners get bored, and the slow learners feel lost and give up. We need a way to make sure the work is **challenging for everyone, but not too difficult for anyone.** The best way to do this is through **Differentiated Instruction (DI)**. DI means changing *what* students learn, *how* they learn it, or *how* they show what they learned, based on their individual needs (Hall, 2002).[1] This article will look at a specific case where a teacher used DI to fix a common problem: teaching writing.

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[1] Hall, T. (2002). Differentiated instruction: Effective classroom practices report.

The Case Study: A Fairer Way to Write

The Problem and The Method

We looked at one 8th-grade EFL class in Samarkand that had 32 students. The teacher needed them to write a persuasive essay. But the students fell into three different skill groups:

1. **Novice Group (Beginners):** Needed a lot of help with basic sentences.
2. **Intermediate Group (Middle):** Understood the grammar but needed better vocabulary and structure.
3. **Advanced Group (Fluent):** Needed a big challenge to keep them interested.

The teacher decided to use **Tiered Assignments** (changing the task difficulty) so that everyone worked on the same topic, but with different levels of support and complexity (Vygotsky, 1978).[2] This is the "Method" part of our case study.

The Differentiated Tasks

The students were all writing about "The Benefits of Learning Foreign Languages," but their required tasks were different:

Skill Group	The "Just Right" Task	Goal of the Task
Novice	Received a list of **sentence starters** ("I think...", "Because of this...") and a clear, simple chart to fill in.	To focus on basic sentence accuracy and essay structure.
Intermediate	Had to use at least **three specific transition words** (e.g., *Firstly, Moreover, In conclusion*) and a new grammar point.	To improve sentence flow and use more complex language.

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[2] Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.

Advanced	Had to write a longer essay and include a **counter-argument** (saying why someone might disagree, then explaining why they are wrong).	To practice critical thinking and persuasive writing skills.

The Findings: What Happened?

The results were simple and very encouraging: **All three groups improved their writing scores** after doing the tiered assignment.

- The **Novice Group** improved the most. By getting the sentence-starters (a type of **scaffolding**), they could finally complete the essay correctly. This shows that giving them the right level of support not too much, not too little works (Wood et al., 1976).

- The **Advanced Group** also improved, showing they didn't get bored. They were challenged by having to write a stronger, more complex essay.

Also, students reported feeling much more confident. They said the assignment was "challenging but achievable." When students feel they can actually finish the work, they try harder (Dörnyei, 2005).

Why This Works in Samarkand

In many schools, there are often large class sizes and one standard textbook. Using DI, the teacher doesn't need to create a whole new textbook. They just need to adjust the **complexity and support** of the assignment. This is an efficient way to make learning personal and fair, even with limited resources.

Conclusion: Making English Learning Fair

This case study clearly shows that Differentiated Instruction is a powerful tool for middle school EFL teachers, especially in places like Samarkand with diverse classes. Instead of teaching to the "average" student, DI allows the teacher to teach to **every** student.[3] By looking closely at what our students can and cannot do (the case study), and then adjusting the work to be "just right," we not only help them write better but also boost their confidence to learn English long-term. Future teachers should try this method to make sure every student gets their own road to success.

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